



# ENHANCING STUDENT RETENTION AND ENGAGEMENT WITHIN FURTHER EDUCATION “WHY STUDENTS WOULD LEAVE?”

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## ABSTRACT

In this paper it has attempted to bring to light some issues on the approach of retention and engagement in the further education sector as well as why students would leave a course.

This work has been undertaken in the UK as a case study within a college, it identifies the differences between education in engineering for part time adult learners with diverse backgrounds. There is a lack of retention and engagement, in the UK's further education (FE) colleges which current strategies do not adequately address. The multitude of factors influencing a FE student's performance has brought together in a coherent structure that enables the needs of individual students to be identified.

**KEY WORDS:** Retention, Engagement, Early leavers, Advise, Recruitment, Further education.

## Introduction

According to Christie (2009) leaving school at 16 to enter the labour market is no longer the norm; young people are expected to continue in education or training to be prepared for entering our 'knowledge economy'. This lengthened transition according to Bovill et al (2011) and Hill (2011) coincides with an expansion of further education (FE), a rise in the number of students choosing to work and study. Not surprisingly the increase in 'school leavers' has expanded further by increased non-traditional entrants such as ethnic minorities, working-class and mature students.

This may be due to a number of reasons, such as the current austerity within the economy which has led to significant job losses and in some cases companies have shut down and individuals have come to FE to retrain.

As we move further into the 21<sup>st</sup> century the landscape of the further and higher education is rapidly changing. This change among others is due to demands placed by funding bodies as well as students and their sponsors. In addition to these demands there is an increasing competition from institutions trying to attract and recruit prospective students. A negative trend in retention can lead to the institution losing its competitive position in the market place.

Delivering a positive impact against retention and engagement requires a clear path way implemented as part of each course. While there are some mechanisms used within UK institutions, these are not fully effective due to the discrete nature of application and the absence of well-defined structure among others.

## Concepts in theory

Many withdrawals are explained by external factors such as the student's home life, but the more recent research concludes otherwise. Trowler (2011) found that both the tutors and the student have a part to play in retention and engagement. Student retention has been the interest for most educational researchers certainly from the beginning of the 70's. Kuh (2005) found that during the 1970's educational research had a strong focus on the first year and also discovered that providing "extracurricular activities" had given a wider experience for students that engaged them. However there is no strong evidence that this engagement led to retention to Kuh's study.

Research in the field of retention throughout the 80's such as Pascarella (1980) had focused on the students identifying their social factors and informal connections within the faculty these were used to evidence why students withdrew Martinez (1998). Later during the 90's research about the role of the institutions play in retention and engagement became more prominent.

During the 21<sup>st</sup> century a range of theories highlighted the internal and external issues Chen's (2008). Theories about retention began to home in on psychological, sociological and economic issues, including the institutions role. Allen (2012) suggested that the common causes for students to withdraw are "poor advice, information and guidance" given during the selection of a course. This can also lead to poor, ineffective inductions in the beginning of a course; in addition Allen also suggested that the structure of the curriculum and teachers with little subject knowledge, coupled with inadequate student support would also lead to early withdrawal.

Other factors which also contributed to this were financial burdens which would lead to lack of motivation and in some cases students with their own personal reasons would withdraw. Caret (2012) suggest that the student voice should be valued using past students to meet and greet new potential students. Inductions could also be conducted with a tutor and student's partnership, according to Kay (2010) who suggests teaching design can be improved by engaging students in close relationships from the beginning of the course.

## Case study College

The case study college's early withdrawal survey was issued to 48 students who were recorded as having withdrawn from the college in 2007-2008, 2008-2009, 2009-2010 and 2010-2011 before completing their courses. From the 48 students only 29 students had responded.

The questionnaire have two main sections focussing on student's reasons for leaving and the advice and guidance they received regarding leaving whilst still at the college.

Some open response questions were included in the questionnaire to give the students the opportunity to highlight issues they considered to be particularly important.

The case study college was the first choice of almost all the students but in many cases their expectations were not met in terms of their relationships with the academic staff and the actual course content. Students often withdrew primarily for personal, medical or social factors such as friendship which appeared more of a concern.

**Table 1 Personal details summary**

Course Year 1	Cohort (Starts) Year 1	Withdrawal	Remained	Retention rate %
2007/2008	21	8	13	61%
2008/2009	29	12	17	58%
2009/2010	34	13	22	64%
2010/2011	33	15	18	54%

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38% (n=8) of the respondents withdrew from their course between the 2007-2008 academic year and the academic year just under half the respondents 41%, (n=12) left in the 2008-2009, a further 38%, (n=13) left during the 2009-2010 academic year and finally just under half withdrew 2010-2011 45%, (n=15) from the course.

Table 1 shows the time of year the respondents withdrew from the college. A high proportion of students withdrew within the first term 54%, (n=25) just over half. And the remainder had withdrawn towards the beginning of the second term and towards the end of the academic year 46%, (n=22) than in any other month of the year.

- 100% of the respondents indicated that they were all year one students.

**Factors that influence retention and engagement**

The students were asked to indicate their main reason for leaving the course their responses are shown below in Table 2, 38% (n=11) of the respondents gave personal as their main reasons for leaving. There was, however, a greater proportion of the students citing transferring to another educational institution as their main reason for leaving 20%, (n=6).

**Table 2 Student main reasons for leaving college**

Statement	Responses (n=29)	Percentages %
Personal	11	38%
Transfer to another college/institution	6	20%
Medical	1	4%
Inappropriate course	5	17%
To seek employment	4	13%
Financial	2	6%

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The students were also asked the extent to which various factors influenced their decision to withdraw from the college in three broad areas:

- Preparation for study at the college and their expectations
- Academic study at the college
- Personal reasons for leaving

Tables 2, 3 and 4 below show the factors from each of these sections and the percentage of students who said each factor had a 'major influence' over their decision to leave.

The most common factors considered to be a *major influence* were:

**Table 3 Preparation and expectations**

Statement	Responses (n=29)	Percentages %
My expectation of the course were not met	4	13%
I selected the wrong course to study	3	10%
I was disappointed by the teaching standards on the course	8	27%
I was disappointed by the amount of teaching and contact hours with staff provided on my course	6	20%
The information I was given prior to staying did not give me a realistic indication of the college.	3	10%
I didn't feel appropriately prepared for studying	3	10%

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Some of the reasons given for withdrawing from the course could be attributed to circumstances outside the college's control such as unexpected illness, pregnancy or paid employment issues. But some of the students felt that they had chosen the wrong course and some indicating the course had failed to meet their expectations.

There were also some large differences in relation to their preparation and expectations. For example, 27% of the students claimed they were disappointed by the teaching standards on the course and 20% were disappointed by the amount of teaching and contact hours with staff provided the course.

**Academic support**

Factors such as poor academic support from the department, poor feedback about their academic work and poor personal support were related to the quality of academic support and feedback which would help explain why many students commented on these factors when given the opportunity to do so at the end of the questionnaire. Reasons cited by a greater proportion of students as influential were all from the 'personal' category, namely balancing part-time work or family and other pressures with study, and their financial situation.

The largest difference was concerned with the importance of forming relationships with their fellow students. Over half of the students 20%, (n=6) said that feeling lonely and not being able to make friends influenced their decision to leave.

**Table 4 Personal reasons**

Statement	Responses (n=29)	Percentage %
I found it too difficult to balance academic work with family or other personal pressures	2	6%
I had a period of illness or personal difficulty and could not catch up with my work	1	3%
I felt lonely/I was not able to make close friends	6	20%
I did not feel I was given helpful personal support by my department	3	10%
I did not know where to seek personal help and advice	4	13%
I did not feel I was given helpful personal support by the college's student services	4	13%
My financial situation was causing great concern	3	10%
I preferred working rather than studying	1	3%
I found it too difficult to balance part-time work with study	3	10%
My family/close friends put pressure on me to leave	2	6%

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It is, perhaps, unsurprising therefore that a greater proportion of students also indicated that they wanted to form relationships with new friends also within this statement. There were also some large differences in relation to their personal reasons. For example, 20% of the students claimed they were feeling lonely and 13% did not know where to go for help and advice and 13% also felt that they did not receive helpful personal support by the college's student services.

**Academic study**

Nearly half of the respondents chose to add one or more comments 31%, (n=9) to the questionnaire the area's most frequently referred to.

**Table 5 Academic study**

Statement	Responses (n=29)	Percentage %
I did not feel that I was given helpful academic support by my department.	9	31%
I wasn't given enough time and detailed feedback to help me improve my grades.	8	27%
I found the transition from other prior study to higher education work very difficult.	4	13%
I found the assessment tasks very much harder than I expected.	2	6%
I did not know where to go to seek academic help or advice.	3	10%
I was disappointed by the marks I had been getting.	3	10%
I didn't work hard enough to pass my course work.	1	3%
The academic advice I was given by the college was not helpful.	2	6%

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Comments referring to the poor support from tutors and academic staff were made by the greatest proportion of students.

Not all students were critical of the academic support they had received; however, the comments were from students who said that they had found the support offered by the college staff had been helpful to them.

*'My experience as a student at college was brilliant. My course was excellent and my tutors (personal and academic) were fantastic.. My withdrawal was due to a sudden illness only. (First year student)*

**Academic staff**

Many of the respondents also commented on their disappointment at the course content, highlighting the perceived discrepancy between how the course was advertised and the reality. More students gave this as an influential factor in their decision to leave the college than any other reason see (table 6). This may be reflected in the fact that just under a quarter of all the respondents 41%, (n=12) indicated that their main reason for leaving college was to 'Poor support from tutors/academic staff'.

It can be seen in table 6 that the experiences and reasons for leaving before completing the course was frequently a combination of factors that influenced students' decisions to withdraw. It was captured during feedback from students that:

*"I got the feeling from staff that they didn't care about me or my academic achievements. Most people were uninspiring and there seemed to be a lack of passion. I am so glad I didn't hang around at the college even though it was hard to leave some my friends"* (first year student)

**Table 6 Experiences and reasons for leaving**

Statement	Responses (n=29)	Percentages%
Poor support from tutors/academic staff	12	41%
The course was misrepresented	7	24%
Withdrew due to personal circumstances	6	20%
Helpful support from College staff	2	6%
I was not ready for the College	2	6%

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### Early leavers and their experiences

From the responses to questions and the comments added by students, the issues that seemed to be important to the early leavers can be categorised into four main areas:

1. Course content 2. Organisation 3. Sources of help 4. Personal circumstances.

*'In retrospect I feel I have made the right decision to withdraw. I am now studying at a different college and enjoying a course that better reflects what I want to do in the future'* (first year student)

Social factors were cited much less frequently. Some of the respondents said that their expectations of their social life at the college were not met and, although a third of the respondents indicated that not being able to make friends and feeling lonely had been some influence in their decision to leave, some also indicated this had been a major influence.

### Course Content and Organisation

Students highlighted several concerns about their courses which led to their withdrawal from the college. Almost all of the questionnaire respondents indicated that the college was their first choice 90%, (n=26). Expectations were therefore high among the students when they started their courses but it would seem, in many cases, that these expectations were not met.

When asked about their reasons for leaving just over half of the respondents indicated that the course had not met with their expectations and this had been at least partly influential in their decision to leave. Just under half 45%, (n=13) of the respondents also indicated that they felt that they had chosen the wrong course and this had influenced their decision to leave. Some students commented that they felt misled by the information given to them about the course prior to starting.

In their opinion, this was somewhat different from the reality once they had started the course, particularly the level of knowledge they would need to be successful on the course:

*'The course was poorly marketed. It stated that there was a minimal amount of maths and that this would be gone through very slowly but it was rushed and complicated, so I was left behind with little help'* (first year student).

*'I was quite clearly unprepared for study in Engineering; this was evident in a matter of days of commencing the course. I believe I was accepted onto the course when I shouldn't have been something I could tell that my tutor agreed with me when I went to discuss withdrawing from study'* (first year student).

Other students expressed disappointment at the actual course content and the options that were available to them as they progressed through the course:

*'I left for two reasons: 1. Towards the end of the first term I got an email telling us that the advertised course for the following term had been cancelled because there were not enough recruited'* (first year student).

### Time tabling was also an issue for a couple of students:

Coming in for 1 hour on a Friday meant that I could not work that day to fund my course. Also the course was not helpful with my child at school, different half term (first year student).

Several students said they decided to leave because they did not feel they were getting value for money from their course:

*'The teaching time (often consisting of a lecturer reading out his notes) was two hours per week for the year!'* (first year student).

### Sources of Help

Over two thirds of the students 48%, (n=14) consulted their personal tutors and about half of the respondents turned to family and friends for advice and guidance. There were no major differences between the advice sources used by students although friends were used as a source of help by a greater proportion of them.

Similarly family was used as a source of help by a far greater proportion of students.

One or more of the colleges central support services were consulted by just under a quarter of the respondents 6%, (n=2). The Student Welfare Service was consulted by the greatest proportion of students 13 %, (n=4) including the Counselling Service, the Careers Service, and the Student Learning Centre.

Exactly half of the students who used one or more of the central support services said the advice they had been given had helped them to consider their options. Just under a third of first year students who responded to the survey had used the student support services and of these students said they had found the advice received helpful.

Table 7 shows the proportion of students who found the most commonly used sources helpful (fewer than 10 students used the additional sources of help).

**Table 7 Advise sources consulted by student**

Statement	Advise helpful (n=29)	Percentage	Advise unhelpful (n=29)	Percentage
Personal tutor	18	62%	11	37%
Family	25	86%	4	13%
Friends	23	79%	6	20%
Other academic staff	20	68%	9	31%
Student services	17	58%	12	41%
Student union	12	41%	17	58%

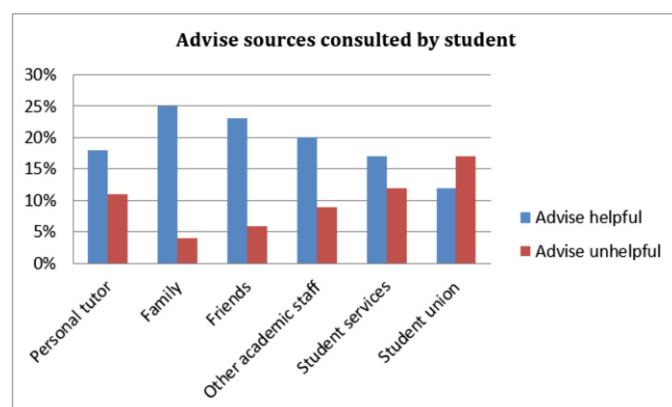
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Although 70% of students asked their personal tutor for help, over a third of these students 35%, (n=79) indicated that the response they received had not been helpful. Students considered the help and advice given to them by their friends and family as being the most helpful, with 94% and 89% respectively of those who had sought support from these sources finding this helpful.

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### Results

**Chart 1 Sources of advice**



Comments about the students' relationships with the academic staff were very common in the questionnaire responses; some examples are given below:

*'I feel that case study college life was very much isolated. I felt that I couldn't gain help or support with my work with a lecturer without using email. I felt that my course was unbelievably impersonal and I found it difficult to speak in person with someone about my work. I feel that email was far too commonly used as a method of communication. When I went to withdraw I was told to speak to my personal tutor. I had no idea who he/she was. We had never been introduced and this was 8 weeks into the course. He had no idea who I was either.'* (first year student)

*'We had no personal tutor meetings and when I tried to discuss issues my personal tutor told me they were busy. This made me feel very helpless and stuck in a bad situation. My personal tutor only replied after I contacted the head of department' (first year student)*

Some students, however, had a much better relationship with academic staff and, in these cases felt that they had been provided with useful support and advice:

*'In deciding what course to take my supervisor was patient, available and extremely helpful. My head of department also offered advice, although to a lesser extent. Once I had decided to transfer to my second year the Support staff gave me advice and assistance on the process which was extremely helpful. Overall my experience of support staff is extremely positive.'* (first year student)

*'I enjoyed the work and it was a difficult decision to leave, but a personal one. My tutor did everything she could to make things easy for me'* (first year student)

Five of the eight students who commented on this said they actually thought they were making satisfactory progress and were very surprised to find out otherwise. Five other students also said they were never made aware that they could appeal against a decision and had not been told.

#### Personal Circumstances

Arguably, the college may be able to address some of the issues that have emerged in the two preceding sections but respondents also highlighted problems of a more personal nature that the college would have very little control over beyond providing appropriate support and advice. Some students had fallen ill, become pregnant or suffered a personal trauma and had therefore not felt able to complete the course.

For others their paid employment did not allow them the time they needed to complete their studies and financial concerns became an issue:

*'To go immediately into hundreds of pounds into debt for this was really disappointing. It has taken me the last 18 months to get over the mental and financial setback as well as costing so much time'* (Engineering student)

Some students simply did not feel ready for Case study college life. One student explained how he had felt pressured into going to University:

*'I left because I was not ready for university. I was pressured to go to college by my parents. I transferred to this a college near my home but dropped out later in the year.'* (first year student)

#### Personal difficulties

44% (n=13) of all respondents to the questionnaire said 'personal' concerns and issues were the main reason for their leaving. The responses to these two questions are shown in table 8 below

**Table 8 Left due to personal difficulties**

Statement	Yes	Percentage	No	Percentage
Did anyone help you to consider alternatives to withdrawal?	13	44%	16	55%
Did anyone guide you through the withdrawal process?	4	13%	25	86%

Where such concerns were influential in the students' decisions to withdraw, they were asked if they had been given any help in considering alternatives to withdrawal and also whether they were given any help with the actual withdrawal process.

#### Discussion

The findings have enabled the researcher to conduct an early intervention questionnaire and in-depth semi-structured interviews with the targeted respondents. Moreover, these findings presents an interpretation, triangulation and reflection of the quantitative and qualitative results. Furthermore, comparative and related studies have been introduced also.

- This lead to investigating the current best practices and experience of retention implementation in colleges.
- This will allow evaluating and measuring the student perception of retention strategies.
- Propose and implement a new framework for supporting student's voice in the area of retention and engagement implementation, this will also include testing for appropriateness in the field of further education.

Where are they now?

At the time of the survey, the majority of respondents were in employment (72%, n=21) or studying elsewhere (14%, n=4) with a further (10%, n=2) doing neither (indicating they were either unemployed).

However, there are a number of aspects of this study that carry particular strengths but also some things the researcher would have done differently and areas which were underdeveloped. This gave the researcher added insight into the context of the study and every day access to students and their experiences. This also gave the researcher a commitment to the study and a desire to carry the study over two years. This was not a study of student retention and engagement in a vacuum, but retention and engagement as an activity encouraged by a tutor.

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